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Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan

April 1980



United States Department of State
Bureau of Public Affairs
Washington, D.C.

The following paper, developed by the Department of State, examines the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan as well as the U.S. and international response to it.

The Soviets invaded Afghanistan on December 27, 1979, following months of domestic political turmoil and growing Soviet involvement. This involvement grew steadily after the Marxist coup led by Nur Mohammad Taraki overthrew President Daoud's nonaligned republican government in April 1978. Although the Soviet Union played little if any role in this coup, the Russians afterwards moved quickly to establish predominant influence in Afghanistan.

Throughout 1979, they had sought to establish an effective government in Kabul. However, the instability of Afghan politics, the ineffectiveness of the new leadership, and a growing, internally based insurgency threatened the pro-Soviet regime's control over the country. As internal resistance grew to a regime perceived as anti-Islamic and Soviet-dominated, the Soviets steadily expanded their military presence and tightened their control over the government. Following a mid-September 1979 shoot-out which may have resulted from a Soviet attempt to remove then-Prime Minister Hafizullah Amin, Taraki was murdered and Amin took over the government.

During the Soviet invasion in December 1979, Amin was killed by Soviet troops in an attack on his palace. Babrak Karmal, in exile in Eastern Europe, was installed by the Soviets as President. The initial announcements of Amin's overthrow, although ostensibly broadcast by

Kabul Radio, actually came from a transmitter in the U.S.S.R.

The Soviet Union now exercises almost complete control over all significant areas of Afghan Government activity. Babrak Karmal has virtually no independence or authority. Soviet advisers have gradually assumed greater authority over the government and now make many day-to-day decisions. Police and security forces are under tight Soviet control, with KGB (Committee for State Security) officers directly involved in their operations.

There are now some 80,000 Soviet troops in Afghanistan, with another 25,000-30,000 poised across the Soviet border. Soviet military advisers may now number as many as 5,000, compared with about 350 before Daoud was overthrown. As their number has increased, their role also has changed. Soviet influence is seen in most aspects of government policy. The Soviets are in virtual command of the Afghan Army from the Defense Ministry down to battalion level and, except for minor local operations, determine the activities of the Afghan Armed Forces. Some Afghan army units have been disarmed.

Despite Soviet and Afghan statements that the Soviets will remain in Afghanistan for only a short time, there is overwhelming evidence that Moscow is planning a prolonged occupation. The movement of additional forces to the Afghan border indicates that the Soviets plan to augment their forces. They are building permanent barracks and other installations within Afghanistan. Reservists originally sent to Afghanistan are being

replaced by troops with longer terms of service. The decision to mount large-scale counterinsurgency operations suggests that they are determined to wipe out nationalist resistance. Given the determination of the resistance forces, this portends a long, bloody struggle.

All three of the Soviet-backed Marxist governments have engaged in brutal repression. When Taraki came to power in 1978, many officials of previous governments were executed; entire families were jailed; thousands were imprisoned with no pretense of judicial process. Executions at Pol-i-Charki prison near Kabul averaged about 50 a night. Amin stepped up repressive measures and maintained order by terror. Thousands were detained in nightly sweeps in Kabul. Although Babrak has promised major reforms, few political prisoners other than Babrak's followers have been released; executions continue; and there are now Soviet guards at Pol-i-Charki.

In the countryside, the successive Afghan governments have tried to stem insurgency. Villages have been destroyed. There were several mass executions, some in the presence of Soviet advisers.

When the Soviets invaded Afghanistan, they tried initially to avoid military actions that would antagonize the population. Frustrated in their efforts to win popular acquiescence in their intervention, however, they have begun to turn to more brutal methods. In the recent offensive in Konarha Province, they leveled villages with napalm and high explosives and forced thousands to flee to Pakistan. There is evidence that the Soviets have used chemical weapons in Afghanistan.

Afghan Resistance

Despite overwhelming Soviet military superiority, resistance has increased dramatically since the Soviet invasion. Resistance forces operate in the countryside and have been joined by Afghan troops. In some cases, entire units have defected to the resistance. Other units have mutinied, killed their advisers, and fought Soviet troops. Even those units that remain ostensibly loyal have been weakened by desertions; occasionally they have refused to engage in offensive operations.

Government control of the cities has declined sharply since the Soviet invasion. At various times, the government has lost almost all control in Herat, Qandahar, and Jalalabad. Most cities and many smaller towns have had general strikes and demonstrations. In Kabul, where previous Marxist governments had no significant problems, there was a

popularly supported 6-day strike, accompanied by anti-government demonstrations, in February.

The Babrak government has virtually no popular support, and there is a widespread perception that his government is ineffective. The government is badly divided.

Over 700,000 Afghans have fled their homes, with most going to Pakistan. This is about 5% of the population; it may reach 10% by summer.

Soviet casualties probably have averaged about 500 a week, most of them the result of attacks on small groups of troops and convoys and of clashes with the Afghan Army. By the beginning of April, total casualties may have reached 7,000.

U.S. Policy

At stake in Afghanistan, first is the freedom of a nation and a people. The Soviets are seeking to impose their control over Afghanistan and to destroy its independence and its right to self-determination.

Vital U.S. interests are involved in southwest Asia and the Persian Gulf. We now depend on the Persian Gulf for roughly 25% of our annual oil imports. Our allies and others—developing nations as well as industrial—are even more dependent on oil from the area. About 66% of Western Europe's oil imports and 75% of Japan's come from the Gulf.

Our interest in the region goes beyond economics. Peace and stability in the region are also critical to the future of the nations there. The strength and skill the United States and others show in supporting their independence will demonstrate to them and to others the constancy of our purpose.

We cannot know with certainty Soviet intentions in the region—whether their motives in Afghanistan are limited or part of a larger strategy. The *fact* is that tens of thousands of Soviet troops are in Afghanistan. Soviet actions have increased the potential threat to the security of nations in the region and to the world's access to vital resources and shipping routes.

To respond firmly to this potential threat is not to be apocalyptic; it is simply to be prudent. As the President has said: "Aggression unopposed becomes a contagious disease."

The actions we have taken in response to the Soviet invasion serve five broad objectives.

- Our first purpose is to impose a heavy price for Soviet aggression—because of our abhorrence of what is being done to the Afghan people and to help deter similar actions elsewhere. The

steps we have taken—on grain, on technology, on the Olympics, on fisheries, and in other areas—convey our determination in the clearest terms. Indeed, the Soviets are paying a heavy price, not only in the measures we have taken but also in the condemnation they have received from an overwhelming majority of nations in the world and on the ground in Afghanistan.

- Our second goal is withdrawal of all Soviet military forces from Afghanistan. The sanctions we have undertaken will remain in force until all Soviet troops are withdrawn from Afghanistan. When Soviet troops are withdrawn, our intention is to remove the sanctions.*

To encourage withdrawal, the President has made clear that we are ready to support international efforts to restore a neutral, nonaligned Afghan government responsive to the wishes of the Afghan people. With prompt withdrawal of Soviet troops from Afghanistan, the United States would be willing to join with Afghanistan's neighbors in a guarantee of Afghanistan's true neutrality and of noninterference in its internal affairs. But the Soviets have shown no interest in such proposals; nor do we see any signs at this time of a Soviet withdrawal.

- This makes our third goal all the more important: to manage East-West relations, during a period of heightened tension, in ways that preserve their essential framework.

We will maintain the penalties of aggression for as long as necessary, but we seek no return to the indiscriminate confrontation of earlier times.

We will continue to pursue our national interest in balanced and verifiable arms control. The President has made clear our continuing commitment to ratification of the SALT II Treaty. The treaty serves our security interests. In accordance with international law, we intend to take no action pending ratification that would defeat the object or purpose of

*Because there are fixed deadlines in connection with the Olympics for which we must plan now, the President made clear that if the Soviets had not withdrawn by February 20, we would oppose participation in the Olympic Games to be held in Moscow. That date having passed, we will oppose such participation under any circumstances. Similarly, it would be our intention to remove the tighter criteria recently announced governing exceptions from controls on high technology exports to the Soviet Union. But the changes proposed in the overall list of items to be controlled would, if adopted by the Coordinating Committee for East-West Trade Policy, remain in place; such changes were being considered before the invasion of Afghanistan as necessary to reflect the state of Soviet technology.

the treaty, so long as the Soviets act in a similar fashion.

We will not abrogate formal agreements with the Soviets.

We will continue to prepare for the Madrid CSCE (Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe) review meeting.

We will continue to build stronger relations with the Eastern European nations.

And we remain prepared to build a more stable and productive relationship with the Soviets when circumstances permit.

- Our fourth goal is to work with the nations of southwest Asia and others to strengthen regional security, stability, and independence. These efforts include helping nations in the area to strengthen their defense capabilities and their political and economic stability, and strengthening our own ability to respond militarily to contingencies that would threaten our vital interests and those of our friends.

We will continue to work toward a comprehensive peace in the Middle East that would strengthen Israel's security, enhance the security of Israel's neighbors, and give greater stability to the entire region.

- Finally, recent events in southwest Asia must renew our commitment to building our nation's basic military and economic strength.

We cannot escape the clear message that we must lessen our dependence on foreign oil.

Furthermore, our overall defense modernization programs will proceed expeditiously, including improvements in our ability to respond swiftly and effectively to military contingencies. We have no desire for military superiority, but we will maintain a military balance.

The Soviet Union has been increasing its defense expenditures by about 4% annually, in real terms, for well over a decade. There has been a substantial increase over this period in Soviet strategic, theater nuclear, and conventional capabilities. For most of that same period, U.S. defense investments, after inflation, were declining. Beginning in 1976, we have reversed the pattern of declining U.S. defense expenditures. We are proceeding with a comprehensive modernization of our strategic, theater nuclear, and conventional forces.

For over a decade, the United States has sought to broaden areas of cooperation with the Soviet Union that could make our relations more reciprocal and productive. Detente, however, must be a two-way street. The Soviet invasion has

increased tensions and precluded business as usual with the U.S.S.R.

International Reaction

On January 14, 1980, the U.N. General Assembly condemned the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan by a vote of 104 to 18 with 18 abstentions—one of the largest majorities in U.N. history on an issue of this kind. The overwhelming vote stripped away any pretensions the U.S.S.R. may have had that the world community would remain indifferent to its aggression.

Western Europe. European leaders have unambiguously denounced the Soviet invasion and supported efforts to bring about a Soviet withdrawal. In a joint February 5 communique, French President Valéry Giscard d'Estaing and West German Chancellor Helmut Schmidt stated that the invasion "creates serious dangers to stability in the region and to peace." They noted that "in the light of events in Afghanistan detente has become more difficult and uncertain, and that therefore withdrawal of foreign troops from Afghanistan is a necessity."

European political cooperation on Afghanistan has been focused in the European Community (EC). Meeting on January 15, the EC Foreign Ministers reaffirmed their "grave concern" over the Soviet invasion, which "represents a serious violation of the principles . . . of the United Nations," a "flagrant interference in the internal affairs of a nonaligned country," and "a threat to peace, security and stability. . . ." They agreed to cancel the 1979 EC food aid program for Afghanistan and committed themselves to emergency aid for Afghan refugees through the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees. The EC adopted the principle that its agricultural supplies should not directly or indirectly substitute for those denied by the United States to the Soviets.

Various European states have taken unilateral economic measures against the Soviet Union. These include reduced diplomatic contacts, cancellation or postponement of exchanges, and concrete economic measures such as the British reduction in export subsidies to the Soviet Union.

Asia. Australia and New Zealand have imposed sanctions on the Soviet Union, reduced contacts with the Soviets, and supported the boycott of the Moscow Olympic Games. Australia is increasing defense expenditures and has ordered its aircraft carrier into the Indian Ocean in support of our presence there.

The Japanese Government has publicly condemned the Soviet invasion. The

Japanese are cooperating in the boycott of the export of high technology and new export credits. They have offered to increase aid to Pakistan and they have canceled aid to Afghanistan. The government also supports the Olympic boycott.

South Korean Foreign Minister Pak Tong-chin, in a recent public statement, voiced deep concern over the Soviet Union's growing military profile in the world.

The Iranian Government has strongly condemned the Soviet invasion. It has expressed its concern that the U.S.S.R. might some day take the same action against Iran.

ASEAN States. The ASEAN (Association of South East Asian Nations) states have publicly condemned the Soviet invasion, most recently in the March communique issued during the ASEAN Foreign Ministers' meeting with the European Community.

India. India favors an early withdrawal of Soviet troops from Afghanistan.

Islamic World. On January 27-28, 35 Muslim countries attending the extraordinary ministerial session of the Islamic Conference in Islamabad strongly condemned the "Soviet military aggression against the Afghani people." The conference's final declaration called for the immediate and unconditional withdrawal of all Soviet forces, not only from Afghanistan but also from the Horn of Africa.

In a resolution proposed by Saudi Arabia, the conference also:

- Suspended Afghanistan's membership in the Islamic Conference organization;
- Invited member states to withhold recognition of the Babrak Karmal regime and to sever diplomatic relations with Afghanistan until the complete withdrawal of Soviet troops;
- Called on all member states to stop all assistance to the present Afghan regime;
- Called on Islamic member states to support the Islamic countries neighboring Afghanistan and assist their efforts to safeguard their sovereignty, national independence, and territorial integrity; and
- Suggested that member states consider not participating in the Moscow Olympics until the withdrawal of all Soviet troops from Afghanistan.

Latin America. Almost all Latin American countries have condemned the Soviet intervention. All voted for the January 14 U.N. General Assembly resolution except Cuba and Grenada, which

voted against, and Nicaragua, which abstained.

Africa. In the General Assembly, 24 African countries voted for the resolution, 18 abstained or were absent, and 3 voted against (Mozambique, Angola, and Ethiopia).

Nonaligned Group. The nonaligned countries generally have registered disapproval of the Soviet intervention (roughly two-thirds voted for the General Assembly resolution). The nonaligned group itself, however, has been unable to agree on a censure resolution.

Eastern Europe. Reactions to the invasion range from strong Bulgarian, Czechoslovak, and East German support

for Soviet actions to criticism of the intervention by Romania, Yugoslavia, and Albania. Hungary and Poland have been more reserved and less vociferous in backing Moscow.

Asian Communist Nations. Vietnam, Mongolia, Laos, and the Heng Samrin government in Kampuchea have publicly supported the Soviets.

North Korean officials have made no public statement. At a conference of parliamentarians from 12 Communist countries in early February, however, the North Korean delegation refused to support a resolution expressing solidarity with the regime in Afghanistan and implicitly backing the Soviet invasion.

Chinese media and official statements repeatedly have condemned the Soviet invasion, demanded a Soviet withdrawal, and called for a united response to the Soviet action. China opposes Moscow's "neutralization" proposal and has stated that it will join an international boycott of the Moscow Olympics. ■

Published by the United States Department of State • Bureau of Public Affairs • Office of Public Communication • Editorial Division • Washington, D.C. • April 1980 • Editor: Norman Howard

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Washington, D C 20520

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